Research Brief

Citizen Perceptions of the Efficacy of Deliberative Exercises

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Alberta Climate Dialogue

Alberta Climate Dialogue (ABCD) is a community-university research alliance funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada from 2010–2015. Our team is exploring how innovative forms of citizen involvement and deliberation can enhance responses and potentially shift the politics of climate change in Alberta.

By convening deliberations with partners and researching the process, we are able to test theories, better understand how to design citizen participation for maximum effect, and help create capacity-building tools for others.

We seek to empower citizens to take action within their communities and give them the opportunity to make recommendations to municipal and provincial governments on climate change policy.

For more information please visit us at AlbertaClimateDialogue.ca or follow us on Twitter @ABClimateDialog
Introduction

This research brief presents the findings from two deliberative exercises conducted by the Alberta Climate Dialogue group. The findings highlight participants’ views about the validity of the deliberative process, whether the government should and will adopt the policy recommendations, and participating in future deliberative projects.

Relevant Literature

The literature on deliberative democracy discusses how this tool for citizen engagement has become increasingly in vogue, starting in the 1990s. Dryzek (2000) has referred to this increasing academic attention as a “deliberative turn.” There are multiple examples of this approach being put into practice, like e-the-People, Web Lab, AmericaSpeaks (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009), and a range of initiatives within the health sector (Abelson et al., 2013).

A key question for deliberative democracy is the extent to which the feedback from these processes is incorporated into public policy. Abelson and Gauvin (2006) describe the difficulty in attributing policy decisions to deliberative exercises. The actual impacts may take years to manifest, may be difficult to attribute to the specific deliberative exercise, and may not have direct policy outcomes, but have other indirect effects, such as influencing public discourse (Abelson et al., 2013; Abelson & Gauvin, 2006; Edwards et al., 2008). This difficulty has led to a reliance on subjective assessments of the policy impacts (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006). Participants’ perceptions of the impact are used to substitute for, or to supplement, measurements of the actual policy impacts of the deliberative exercise (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

While it is too early to assess the policy impacts of the deliberations that are the subject of this study, we are able to examine participants’ perceptions or expectations with regard to future policy impacts. We examine participants’ responses to a set of questions that measure their perceptions about the policy impacts, their perceptions about the validity of the process, as well as their interest in participating in future deliberative processes.
Case Studies

In the fall of 2012 and 2013, two deliberations were conducted in which participants were recruited through random digit dialing. The fall 2013 deliberation, Energy Efficiency Choices, was a virtual deliberation in which participants could participate online or by telephone. This deliberation involved a two hour discussion focusing on energy efficiency. Participants were recruited from across the entire province. The fall 2012 deliberation, the Edmonton Energy and Climate Challenges Panel, was an in-person deliberation, spanning six Saturdays and covering energy and climate change issues. Participants were recruited from across the City of Edmonton. City of Edmonton councillors and staff participated in the event as co-organizers, observers, and presenters, whereas in the Alberta-wide deliberation, the Government of Alberta was not involved. The Alberta-wide deliberation was a collaborative effort among the Alberta Energy Efficiency Alliance and the Universities of Alberta and Athabasca.

In both deliberations, participants were given a participant guide which provided information about the topics to be discussed. Both deliberations involved small group discussions where participants discussed a number of policy options. In both cases, the discussions were facilitated by trained moderators. In the case of the Edmonton Citizens Panel, the participants produced a report setting out their preferences and recommendations to city decision-makers. The Energy Efficiency Choices also produced a report, but the report-writing was done by event organizers instead of the participants.

The two deliberative exercises differ in terms of mode (virtual versus in-person), length (two hours versus 42 hours), level of government targeted (provincial versus municipal), and involvement of policymakers (no involvement to significant involvement). Both involved discussions of energy issues, but there were slight differences in the policy options being considered. While the Edmonton Energy and Climate Challenges deliberation focused on municipal policy options (e.g., changes to public transit, urban densification), the province-wide deliberations focused on policy options such as new taxes or new fees on utility bills.

Research Questions

- To what extent did participants consider the process valid for creating effective policy recommendations?
- To what extent did participants think the government would adopt the policy recommendations?
- According to participants, how much influence should the recommendations have on government policy?
- How motivated are the participants to participate in deliberative projects in the future?
Methods

For the province-wide Energy Efficiency deliberation, all 164 participants were asked to complete a series of short web surveys soliciting feedback about the deliberative process. In the Edmonton Energy and Climate Challenges deliberation, all 56 participants were invited to complete a short survey during the last of the six meetings. The sample sizes differ for each survey question (see the legends for each figure), because some respondents specified ‘don’t know,’ or did not answer particular questions. “Don’t know” and non-responses were excluded from our calculations. The results are reported as percentages. The same questions were asked on each survey, allowing us to compare the responses between the two deliberation projects.

Findings

Figure 1 shows that participants agreed that the deliberation would lead to logical recommendations. Approximately 80% of the Energy Efficiency deliberation participants expressed this view and more than 90% of the Energy and Climate Challenges deliberation participants expressed this view.

Table 1: Deliberation will result in logical recommendations

![Bar chart showing the percentage of participants agreeing with the statement that the deliberation will result in logical recommendations.](chart)

**Survey Question:** In my opinion, the structure and conduct of this deliberation is likely to result in logical recommendations.

Figure 2 shows a significant difference between the two deliberative exercises regarding citizens’ perceptions of how their recommendations would influence government decision-making. Only 44% of the participants in the Energy Efficiency deliberation thought there was a chance that the Government of Alberta would adopt the recommendations. However, more than 80% of the participants in the Energy and Climate Challenges deliberation thought there was a chance that the City of Edmonton would adopt the recommendations.
On the other hand, Figure 3 shows that almost all participants in both deliberations thought that the deliberative body should have influence on the respective government’s decisions. More than 90% of the Energy Efficiency deliberation participants thought their recommendations should have an influence on government, whereas 100% of the Energy and Climate Challenges deliberation participants thought their recommendations should have an influence on government.

**Survey Question:** How much influence should Energy Efficiency Choices/Citizens’ Panel on Energy and Climate Challenges have on the Province of Alberta’s/City of Edmonton’s decisions about energy policy and programs/energy policy and climate change measures? **Note:** The response options were slightly different for the two projects (5 point scale versus 7 point scale). As such the responses were collapsed into two categories: no effect and some effect to allow for comparison.
Figure 4 shows how respondents felt about participating in future deliberative exercises. Approximately 80% of participants from both deliberations expressed an interest in future participation.

**Figure 4: Motivation to Participate in Future Deliberations**

![Motivation Chart]

**Survey Question:** How motivated or unmotivated are you to participate in future deliberations related to this topic or any other topic?

**Discussion**

It is too early to know whether the provincial or municipal governments will respond to the policy recommendations put forth by these deliberative projects. However, the survey data reveal some interesting details about the participants’ perceptions of the processes and their expectations regarding the deliberative group’s political efficacy. Most participants agreed that the deliberation in which they were involved would lead to logical recommendations and that these recommendations should be considered by government. However, while more than 80% of the Energy and Climate Challenges participants thought that the recommendations would be considered by the municipal government, only 44% of the Energy Efficiency participants expected that their recommendations would be considered by the provincial government.

The differences may be explained by a number of factors. The two deliberations were similar in topic, but differed in the level of government targeted by the deliberation, the duration of the deliberation, the mode of the deliberation, and the types of policy options discussed (new taxes versus changes to transportation infrastructure). Another factor that may have influenced these results is the level of involvement of government officials in the deliberations. City of Edmonton staff and councillors played a significant role in the deliberations about energy and climate challenges, whereas the Province of Alberta was not involved in the deliberations about energy efficiency issues. In other words, citizens could see, in the Edmonton case, that city officials were aware of the deliberative process and taking the process seriously. In the provincial-level deliberation,
on the other hand, participants had no interaction with government officials or politicians; the latter were not present during the discussions.

The literature provides a mixed view about the role of policymakers in deliberative processes. Abelson et al. (2003) argue that the agency of a deliberative body could be constrained when the initiating actor, often a health authority, is engaged in extensive steering of the proceedings. Based on the comparison of these two deliberations, we believe that the involvement of government officials was enhanced the deliberative group’s sense of political efficacy. However, we cannot determine whether the deliberative group’s sense of political efficacy was influenced by the mere presence of City planning officials or whether their sense of political efficacy was influenced by other factors. For example, in the Participant Handbook 2012, the Citizens’ Panel were told that the “administration committed to taking the recommendations of the Citizens’ Panel seriously” (page 9). Statements such as this one could have influenced participants’ sense of efficacy.

Little research has been done on the public’s views of these deliberative bodies. How much confidence does the public have in these randomly-selected citizens groups who deliberate on policy options? To what extent is the public willing to support recommendations from these deliberative bodies? Further ABCD research will examine how the public reacts to recommendations from these deliberative and will examine the public’s perceptions of the influence of citizen deliberation on government policy.

Despite mixed feelings about the efficacy of the deliberative bodies, approximately 80% to 90% of participants expressed an interest in participating in future deliberative projects. The finding is remarkable in the Edmonton context, as these participants participated in a 42 hour event (6 Saturdays). Despite the time commitment, 90% of participants were interested in participating in future deliberative events. Delli Carpini et al. (2004) expressed concerns that the failure of deliberative events to influence policy makers could disillusion citizens about the value of deliberative democracy. Research has not examined the long-term impacts on participants when policy recommendations are explicitly rejected or are not acted upon. Government’s failure to act on the participants’ recommendations may diminish participants’ enthusiasm for future participation in deliberative democracy. On the other hand, seeing government react to recommendations could empower citizens and demonstrate the value of deliberative democracy. We plan to assess these differing possibilities by conducting a two-year follow-up survey of participants in the Edmonton event.
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